

Beethoven: The Musician of Liberty

The personality, the place, and the time combined to produce the brilliant artist, sensitive in the highest degree to the impulses of the new era. Nourished by the vision of liberated humanity and the dignity of the individual, thrown up by the French Revolution, the German composer van Ludwig Beethoven (1770-1827) created the music of a heroic age in melodic accents never to be forgotten, proclaiming his profound faith in the power of the individual to shape his or her destiny.

On 14 July 1789, when Beethoven was 19 years old, the horrible Bastille fell before the onslaught of the people, long enslaved by monarchy, feudal aristocracy and the Church. France was resounding with the slogans of liberty, equality and fraternity.

The French Revolution shook all Europe. While the thrones trembled, the people danced with joyful expectation. The strongest feudal armies were being trounced by the French working people. Captivated by this spectacle, the English poet laureate William Wordsworth (1770-1850) cried out:

Bliss was in that dawn to be alive
But to be young was very heaven

Beethoven came on the scene at a favourable moment in history. He inherited from the great composers Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) a style and musical forms which were well developed but still capable of further growth. Historically, Beethoven's work is built on the achievements of the classical period (1750-1800). By the force of his own genius, he transformed this heritage and became the source of much that was characteristic of the Romantic period. Beethoven himself is neither classic nor romantic. He is Beethoven, who towers like a colossus astride the two eras.

Beethoven, like Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) and Napoleon I (1769-1821), was a child of the tremendous upheaval which had been fomenting all through the 18th century against feudalism, medievalism and obscurantism. It is a curious fact that in all Mozart's correspondence, there is no mention of the French Revolution. Haydn too was quite indifferent to it. But the music of Beethoven is unthinkable without the Revolution. Beethoven's grandfather was an excellent musician and a man of fine character. His mother, Maria Magdalena, had many cares and sorrows, and his father, Johann, added nothing to the comfort of the family. Beethoven's mother had little to give her son except love and understanding. It was from his mother that Beethoven inherited much of his deep and true feeling for the good and the beautiful.

In contrast to most musicians of that time, he had no wish for a patron. He refused to look up to the titles and to depend upon the nobility. "My nobility is here and here", Beethoven is said to have remarked, pointing proudly to his head and heart.

One of his friends, Prince Karl Lichnowsky, during the French invasion insisted that Beethoven play for the French officers. Beethoven refused, and stormed out the palace. He wrote to his friend: "Prince, what you are, you are through the accident of birth. What I am, I am through my own efforts. There have been many princes and there will be thousands more. But there is only one Beethoven".

This genius of music was also a revolutionary, and his heart thrilled to the ideals of liberty and democracy. In wanting to honor Napoleon, the hero of the hour, Beethoven wrote Symphony 3. He poured out all the idealism of his great heart, dedicating it to Napoleon, and named it the Eroica Symphony.

In December 1804, Napoleon crowned himself Emperor. Beethoven was disenchanted, for in Napoleon he had seen the incarnated spirit of the Revolution and the freedom of the human being. The embittered composer tore up the dedicatory page, and rewrote: "Eroica Symphony, to celebrate the memory of a great man".

In the Symphony, Beethoven found the ideal medium wherein to address humankind. His nine symphonies are spiritual dramas of universal appeal. Their sweep and tumultuous affirmation of life make them a pinnacle of rising democratic art.

He did not succumb to his growing deafness. The will to struggle asserted itself. "I am resolved to overcome every obstacle. I bid defiance to my fate. I will take my fate by the throat. It shall not overcome me. Oh, how beautiful it is to be alive. Would that I could live a thousand times".

Having overcome the chaos within himself, Beethoven came to believe that the human being could conquer chaos. This became the epic theme of his music, the progression from despair to conflict, from conflict to serenity and from serenity to triumph and joy. Beethoven became the major prophet of struggling humanity, and the architect of the heroic vision of life.

Beethoven's music falls into three periods. In the first period, up to 1802, he was making his way as a musician, assimilating the traditions of Haydn and Mozart. In the second period, from 1802 to 1814, he was able to realise in the form and content of his music what was essentially a new worldview.

This is the period of his major symphonies, from the 2nd to the 8th, of the opera *Fidelio*, the last three piano concertos, a number of string quartets. The idiom that he started with was that of folk and popular dance, march and song. He was the idol of all forward-looking and progressive minds. His first biographer and friend writes of "his never-ceasing opposition to every existing political institution", and says: "In his political sentiments, he was a republican".

In the third period, from 1814 to 1827, only one symphony appeared. Following the defeat of Napoleon, there came the worst tide of political reaction, the restoration of feudal despots and an attempt on the part of the Holy Alliance to stamp out the democratic movement. Beethoven turned to the more intimate forms of piano sonatas and string quartet. Even here, there is no surrender to despair, but always a sense of struggle and a serenity and an affirmation of faith in life, which was the keynote of Beethoven's character and art.

Beethoven possessed the habits of a student. He read much. He thought much. He found satisfaction in the poetry of Goethe and Johann Schiller (1759-1805), whose poem "Ode to Joy" so fully expresses the ideals of liberty and democracy that Beethoven used it in his monumental 9th Symphony.

Beethoven's music stems from the Promethean struggle for self-realisation. It is the expression of a titanic force, the affirmation of an all-conquering will. Beethoven climaxed his magnum opus with sublime supplication: "All men shall brothers be". Beethoven, who embodied the sufferings, joys and hopes of humanity, will remain enshrined in the hearts of people all over the world.